

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Hakutani, Yoshinobu, *East-West Literary Imagination: Cultural Exchange from Yeats to Morrison* (University of Missouri Press, 2017).

Yoshinobu Hakutani's *East-West Literary Imagination: Cultural Exchange from Yeats to Morrison* is a theoretical text. It analyses the influence of the Eastern philosophies, literature and arts on the Western literary imagination, with a specific focus on the Irish poet W.B. Yeats and some American poets and novelists. Hakutani contends that among some major Eastern philosophies such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, Buddhist literary practices influenced the Western writers most and helped them to create a hybrid literature throughout nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The text groups the selected Western writers in terms of three literary periods, transcendental, modern and postmodern, and highlights the influence of different sects of Buddhism on those writers. Hakutani takes a comparative and contrapuntal approach. He re-reads American and Irish writing and claims that, although American literature has been originated from the European literature, none can deny the influence of Confucianism and Buddhism on it.

The first part, 'Transcendentalists', discusses Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. Hakutani shows that the liberal thinker Thoreau was well-versed in some of the major Eastern religions and preferred Lord Buddha to Jesus Christ. Thoreau was heavily influenced by the Confucian ethics, and this interest is reflected in his book *Walden* and his essay 'Civil Disobedience'. He, like Confucius, regarded silence as the sound of the universe and plunged himself in the solitude of the nature to acquire wisdom and peace. Accordingly, his concepts of individualism, individual conscience, individual and nature, individual and society become a reservoir of moral precepts.

However, unlike Thoreau, Emerson was critical of Zen philosophy, a sect of Buddhism that calls its followers to achieve Buddhahood within themselves through the state of *Mu*, nothingness, and the 'satori', the enlightenment. Although Emerson was intrigued by the mysticism of the Eastern ontologies, he explained the relationship of God, the Over-soul, with the human self in a different way. To Emerson, a human soul can be self-reliant when it juxtaposes the power of itself with the power of God. Thus, not the nothingness and the unconscious, but the subjective perception of soul and Over-soul, enlightens an individual and makes him or her self-reliant. In this way, Emerson diametrically opposes the concepts of the unconscious, the unsymbolisable and intersubjectivity that Jacques Lacan, Emily Dickinson, Roland Barthes and Ezra Pound shared with Zen philosophy. He rather has more affinity with Whitman who was ambivalent towards Zen doctrine, as expressed in his 'Song of Myself' and 'Passage to India'.

The text also illustrates East-West cultural exchange in the modern and postmodern tradition of writing poems. Hakutani begins his analysis with the Irish poet W.B. Yeats. Yeats became familiar with the Japanese literature through his predecessors Lafcadio Hearn, Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound. He disliked the conflict between science and spiritualism of the Victorian period and the concept of realism which considered an artist not 'a human being, but an

Book reviews: *East-West Literary Imagination: Cultural Exchange from Yeats to Morrison* by Yoshinobu Hakutani. Umme Salma.

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

invention of science' (85). He developed friendship with Yone Noguchi, a Japanese writer,¹ and became interested in the spiritualism and symbolism, represented in Japanese Noh plays. A Noh play generally narrated 'the human tragedy rather than comedy of the old stories and legends seen through the Buddhistic flash of understanding' (73). Yeats found those elements congenial and adapted the form of Noh plays to serve his purpose of reviving Irish legends.

Like Noh plays, the Japanese haiku also influenced the European and American writers. Hakutani provides a detailed historical and stylistic account of the haiku and praises the contribution of Noguchi in making the West familiar with this poetic form in the second decade of the twentieth century. Hakutani cites many beautiful haiku, translated by Noguchi from Japanese into English, in the text, as for example,

Sunset on the sea:
The voices of the ducks
Are faintly white. (97)

Fascinated by the haiku form (a verse form of seventeen syllables) and its impersonal portrayal of concise imagery, Ezra Pound constructed his idea of imagism, which he called a 'VORTEX' (98). Nevertheless, World War Two temporarily suppressed the interest of Western poets in haiku. British writers in Tokyo, such as Harold G. Henderson and R. H. Blyth, renewed that interest after the war and consequently, the African American writer Richard Wright and poets of the Beat generation such as Jack Kerouac started to compose haiku. Wright himself wrote over four thousand haiku in the last eighteenth months of his life. His haiku exposed the aesthetic principle of *yugen*, *sabi* and *wabi* and combined both traditional and modernist motifs and traits of writing haiku.² One example can be given here:

A thin waterfall
Dribbles the whole autumn night, –
How lonely it is. (139)

In the same way, Kerouac, being influenced by Mahayana Buddhism,³ wrote haiku. He emphasised the expression of spontaneous emotions in poetry and thus advocated an unlimited freedom of the poetic sensibility. Also, the next generation of African American poets, such as Robert Hass, Sonia Sanchez and James A. Emanuel, inspired by Wright's poems, experimented with haiku. Among them, Emanuel created a new tradition of Jazz haiku, combining aesthetics of jazz and haiku together.

¹ It is interesting to note that Yone Noguchi had an intimate relationship with the Bengali literary giant Rabindranath Tagore. The period when Tagore, Yeats, Pound and Noguchi came in touch with one another was the time around which Tagore published 'Songs of Offerings' (1913) and won the Nobel prize.

² *Yugen* is one of the delicate principles of the Japanese art. It denotes modesty, concealment, depth and darkness (132-3). *Sabi* is a familiar term in Japanese poetics which refers to 'what is described is aged' (133). It is the sensibility of loneliness which denotes 'a grace rather than splendour' and 'quiet beauty rather than robust beauty.' *Wabi* refers to 'the uniquely human perception of beauty stemmed from poverty'. It proposes that those who are poor are blessed, but the emphasis is not on the moral aspect of poverty, but on the aesthetic principle of deprivation (132-6).

³ It is a sect of Buddhism that preaches that the goal of life of a follower of Buddhism is to achieve Buddhahood, 'a celestial state of enlightenment an acceptance of all forms of life' (155).

East-West Literary Imagination examines the influence of the Buddhist philosophy on the American modernist and postmodernist tradition of writing novels. Hakutani argues that unlike the Victorian novel, modern novels do not sketch realism and naturalism or tell a story and convey a moral. Rather they depict a 'different self' (13) which emerges once the central character's ego is destroyed and leads the hero or heroine to a new form of self-realisation. Hakutani finds this self-realisation as the manifestation of the Buddhist concept of karma (human deeds) and nirvana (the state of oblivion of the self) which the novels of the existential tradition portray. He reinterprets Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953) and moves away from the existential interpretation of Wright's novel. He argues that, unlike Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1946), Wright's novel is a discourse of race where the hero Damon struggles to be an insider in the American society. However, both novels depict the universal human condition through the Buddhist concept of karma and nirvana and thus become specimens of the cross-cultural writings.

Likewise, postmodern novels, such as Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* (1982) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and travelogues, such as Richard Wright's *Black Power* and *Pagan Spain*, reflect the concept of enlightenment in Buddhism. Hakutani re-reads all these three novels and finds them as the conveyors of the East-West literary practices. The novel *Colour Purple* delineates the female protagonist Celie's quest for voice and identity in the male-dominated society. It shows that Celie finds her voice and identity through Buddhism where the colour purple in the field symbolises the divine communion between her and nature. In the same way, Wright's travelogues and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) portray the East-West crossroads through their representation of the African's 'primal outlook upon life' (229). Hakutani finds that the Akan religion and Buddhism share the concepts of the divinity of the self; unity, continuity and infinity of the life and death; and reincarnation which both Morrison and Wright uphold through their portrayal of the force of kinship and love, prevalent in the African culture.

The text *East-West Literary Imagination* is written in a lucid and understandable language. However, Hakutani's structuring and handling of the broad and complex issue of the East-West literary reciprocity at times appear haphazard. Also, his title is a bit too broad, and runs the risk of conveying a mistaken impression about the book at a first glance. Still, I hope the book will attract students, academics and researchers interested either in the Eastern, specifically Japanese or Western, specifically Irish and American Studies.

Umme Salma